

# Aeneas visits Greek Rome

Peter Wiseman

Virgil's *Aeneid* is the classic statement of how the Romans of the age of Augustus imagined the origins of their city and their empire. In previous centuries, however, the Romans had believed quite different stories about how their city had first been founded, and in Book 8 Virgil alludes to one of them in order to add an extra dimension to Aeneas' adventures. Peter Wiseman here describes how modern archaeology can help us to make sense of the story of Evander before the Trojan ships rowed up the Tiber.

## Tiber the river-god appears to Aeneas

As dreams go, it must have been quite alarming – the river-god himself emerging among the poplars with reeds round his head. Aeneas' sleep was troubled anyway, with anxieties about the war he would have to fight against the Latins. But now the god of the Tiber brought encouragement:

*The Arcadians are a race descended from Pallas. They came to these shores following the standards of their king Evander, chose a site here and established in these hills a city called Pallanteum after their founder Pallas. This people wages continual war with the Latin race. Welcome them into your camp as your allies. Make a treaty with them. I will take you to them straight up my river between these banks and you will be able to row upstream into the current.*

(Virgil, *Aeneid* 8.51–8, in David West's translation)

Aeneas wakes, prays to the local deities and mans two ships. Normally they would have had to haul the ships upstream, but Tiber obligingly reverses his flow and the Trojans make easy headway using oars. They don't know it, but they're cruising into someone else's myth...

## Evander, King of Pallanteum, in sources before Virgil

It's a well-known myth: impregnated by Zeus in the form of a swan, Leda gave birth to three daughters – Helen, Clytemnestra, and Timandra. If you haven't heard of the third one, that's because Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*,

which told her story, survives only in fragments. Timandra married Echemos of Tegea in Arcadia, and their son was Euandros, anglicized as Evander. Evander lived in Pallantion, a town in Arcadia, but was driven out and took his followers overseas. Virgil gives Evander different parents, but he also alludes to the old Hesiodic version of the story by making Aeneas mention Evander's kinship with Agamemnon and Menelaus, the husbands of his wife's more famous sisters, Clytemnestra and Helen (*Aen.* 8.130).

Hesiod's poem was composed about 700–650 B.C. A century or so later, another great archaic narrative (also surviving only in fragments) was produced by Stesichorus of Himera, on the north coast of Sicily. This was the *Geryoneis*, which told the tale of Herakles' tenth Labour, to capture and bring back the cattle of Geryon, who lived at the western edge of the world. We happen to know that Stesichorus' poem mentioned the Arcadian town of Pallantion, so Evander's story probably featured in it. Virgil shows us what the connection was: Hercules, driving the cattle south through Italy, came to the town Evander and his fellow-exiles had founded; this was Pallantion by the Tiber, named after their Arcadian home, which later became known in Latin as Pallanteum, the Palatine hill.

## Archaeological evidence for Evander's Pallanteum

Thanks to archaeology, we now know that the Romans knew this story of Hercules' visit to Evander's town Pallanteum, within a generation or two of Stesichorus' time. In the 1930s Italian archaeologists discovered the remains of an archaic temple just south of the Capitol. It had been built at

the north end of the area the Romans called the 'Cattle Forum', *forum boarium*, after the herd Hercules was driving, and it faced south towards the site of the *ara maxima*, 'the Greatest Altar', which was erected by Evander's Arcadians for the worship of the deified Hercules. Part of a large terracotta statue group survives, recognisable as the goddess Athena escorting Hercules to Olympus. The archaeological date of the temple and its decoration is about 530 B.C.

## Evander – founder of Rome?

Virgil calls Evander 'the founder of the citadel of Rome' (*Aen.* 8.313). Of course he shared the belief everyone took for granted in his time, that Rome was founded much later by Romulus; indeed, he makes Jupiter prophesy as much in Book 1 (*Aen.* 1.273–7). But here again, in making a reference to *Evander* as the founder of Rome, he is making a learned allusion to a different story. According to the senator Gaius Acilius, who wrote a history of Rome in Greek about 140 B.C., Evander founded Rome itself. And why shouldn't Rome have been thought of as a Greek foundation? After all, her very name was a transliteration of the Greek for 'strength' (*rhōmē* > *Roma*).

## Pallanteum – the 'citadel of Rome'

It's interesting that Virgil refers to the citadel of Rome. He'd used the word already, when describing the Trojan ships coming up the river between the trees:

*The fiery sun had climbed to the middle of the vault of heaven when they saw in the distance walls and a citadel and the roofs of scattered houses. What Roman power has now raised to the heights of the sky, in those days was a poor land ruled by Evander. Quickly they turned their prows to the bank and steered for the city.*

(*Aen.* 8.97–101)

What they saw must be the Palatine (Pallanteum). Virgil and his readers knew that the western corner of the Palatine, facing the river, featured high walls that looked like the defences of an acropolis. Here too archaeology can give us a new

perspective into what Virgil's ancient readers knew – or thought they knew – about their city's history.

### Excavations of the Palatine

That corner of the Palatine has been intensively explored, in a series of excavations that began in 1861 and are still continuing. New research makes it possible, at least approximately, to date five important phases of development on this site:

- Phase 1: about 900–830 B.C.: a necropolis of mixed inhumation and cremation burials.
- Phase 2: about 830–730 B.C.: the necropolis is now replaced by a group of hut dwellings.
- Phase 3: about 530–500 B.C.: the hut village is swept away in an extensive redevelopment, including terracing and buildings with terracotta decoration.
- Phase 4: about 310–290 B.C.: new redevelopment; temple of Victoria dedicated in 294 B.C., a new street built to provide access up to the temple from the river level.
- Phase 5: subsequent creation of new temples at the top of the hill: temple of Magna Mater (dedicated 191 B.C.), temple of Apollo (dedicated 28 B.C.).

The fourth phase of development in 310–290 B.C. created the 'citadel' Virgil alludes to in the *Aeneid*. It was modelled on Athens. At a time when the Romans were conscious of the Athenian empire as a historical model for their own dominion over central Italy, they developed this bit of the Palatine on the pattern of the Athenian acropolis: a temple of Nikē ('victory') at the top of the access ramp, and a cave of Pan (the Lupercal) below.

One of the graves from the first phase was uncovered in 1907. Although the grave itself dated to the earliest phase of the Palatine's development, it contained an Etruscan cup dating to the third phase (the late sixth century B.C.) and was covered with a single slab of stone of a type not used earlier than the fourth phase. In other words, this ancient grave must have been rediscovered on at least two separate occasions as the area was successively redeveloped, and presumably it was reconsecrated each time. The temple of Victoria on the Palatine, which belonged to the fourth phase, was built on the same orientation as the grave, which was in front of it and below it, near where the altar would have been. Walls were built round the site of the grave, creating a precinct which was very probably a 'hero-shrine'.

### The unknown hero on the Palatine

Who was the hero they built the shrine to? That's really asking three different questions (if not more):

1. Who was the real person buried in the grave in the ninth century B.C., in an Iron-Age community that almost certainly wasn't yet called Rome? Answer, God alone knows.

2. Whose bones did the Romans of the late sixth century B.C., who rediscovered the grave, *think* they'd uncovered, when they were turning their timber-and-thatch town into a proper city? Answer, an ancient hero, but probably not Aeneas, who is first associated with Rome by the Greek historian Hellanikos much later, about 400 B.C. Probably not Romulus either, who is first mentioned by the Sicilian-Greek historian Alkimos about 340 B.C. But quite possibly they believed it was the grave of the hero Evander, especially if we were right to suppose that the statue-group of 530 B.C., from a temple down by the river below this very site, is evidence that the Romans knew Stesichorus' poem about Herakles.

3. Whose bones did the Romans of the late *fourth* century B.C. think they'd uncovered, when they were creating their new Athenian-style 'acropolis' with its temple of Victory? Answer, maybe Romulus or Remus, since their story was probably being developed at just about this time; but more likely Evander, since the cult of Victory at the top of the hill and the Lupercal cave at the bottom were both attributed to him.

### Evander's place in Virgil's story of Rome

There were many mutually inconsistent legends about Rome's foundation. Evander's story may be one of the earliest, current long before those of Aeneas and Romulus, which later eclipsed it. Virgil, of course, was committed to the Trojan story and its Romulean sequel, but he still found a way of bringing Evander into his story – and he gave him a son, Pallas, who challenges Aeneas at the Trojans' first approach and will be avenged by him in the last lines of Virgil's epic.

*Peter Wiseman is Professor Emeritus at the University of Exeter. If you're interested in how early Rome fitted into the world of Greek mythology, the early chapters of T. P. Wiseman, The Myths of Rome (2004, paperback 2008), may be just what you need. Evander features prominently in Ovid's Fasti, of which a new translation by Anne and Peter Wiseman (Ovid: Times and Reasons) has just been published by OUP.*